Records Show Palantir Made $60 Million Contracting with ICE for Mobile App

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Palantir, the secretive data company founded by billionaire Trump surrogate and well-known Silicon Valley techno-goblin Peter Thiel, has come under fire in recent months for its work with Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other government agencies involved in implementing Trump's racist anti-immigrant policies. Protests organized both from within the tech community and from immigrants' rights organizations have highlighted the essential role that Palantir plays in keeping the wheels of ICE raids turning.

A critical July 2019 exposé from WNYC based on documents obtained via FOIA request shows how Palantir's proprietary software, in this case the FALCON mobile app, is essential to the removal operations of ICE and related agencies. As WNYC explained, "FALCON mobile allows agents in the field to search through a fusion of law enforcement databases that include information on people's immigration histories, family relationships, and past border crossings."

But while the information contained in the WNYC story, as well as reporting from other news outlets, is important for what it reveals about how Palantir collaborates with the deportation machine, we have not yet had the financial side of the Palantir-ICE relationship come into focus. Until now.

CounterPunch has learned that since 2016, Palantir has made more than $60 million in contract awards from ICE for access to FALCON and for Operations & Maintenance (O&M) for the mobile application. This, of course, is solely for FALCON and related services, and likely just scratches the surface of the true scope of Palantir's profits from collaboration with ICE, to say nothing of Palantir's lucrative relations with other government agencies such as CIA, DoD, etc.

"We Just Provide the Tools"

Peter Thiel and his fellow ghoul, Palantir CEO Alexander Karp, are fond of describing Palantir's mission as simply providing the US government and other clients with the best data aggregating tools available. Oh, Palantir isn't responsible for any of the abuses of its technology, nor is it directly involved in their application to policies in violation of international law and human rights. No. Palantir simply develops the technology and sells it, right?

Well, that's certainly the cover story that Thiel, Karp et al like to employ. But US Government financial records reveal a much more direct and intimate collaboration between Palantir and ICE, down to the individual user level. As the documents obtained by WNYC reveal:

In one email from April of last year, a Palantir staffer notifies an ICE agent that they should test out their FALCON mobile application because of his or her "possible involvement in an upcoming operation." Another message, in April 2017, shows a Palantir support representative instructing an agent on how to classify a datapoint, so that Palantir's Investigative Case Management [ICM] platform could properly ingest records of a cell phone seizure.

What these emails show in glimpses is a company that is much more than a mere third-party vendor. Rather, Palantir's relationship with ICE is more that of an intimate partner involved in the day-to-day operations of the organization. Karp and Palantir are more than just "providing the tools," they're providing the brains. The speed and scope of ICE operations would be impossible were it nor for FALCON and Palantir's hand-holding.

To be fair to Karp, Thiel, and their army of orcs in t-shirts and blazers, nothing that Palantir is doing today is out of step with the crimes it has previously been involved in.

Palantir: Thiel's Own Totalitarian Collective

In his 2009 essay for the right wing Cato Institute, Thiel wrote:

I remain committed to the faith of my teenage years: to authentic human freedom as a precondition for the highest good. I stand against confiscatory taxes, totalitarian collectives, and the ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual. For all these reasons, I still call myself "libertarian."

Interestingly, while Thiel was busily virtue-signaling his hatred of "totalitarian collectives" he was even busier expanding a company that rightly is seen as a primary node in the architecture of contemporary authoritarianism, and a linchpin of a totalitarian future.

In 2011, journalist Barrett Brown and his colleagues revealed a plot by a consortium of powerful private intelligence contractors intending to target activists, journalists, and those associated with WikiLeaks on behalf of its wealthy US private clients.

Called "Team Themis" the plan was to use Palantir, in collaboration with intelligence contractors HBGary and Berico, to gather information and intelligence on journalists like Glenn Greenwald (among others) and use that information for the purposes of infiltration, intimidation, and disruption of groups organizing against the financial interests of Team Themis's clients. The tactics ranged from intelligence gathering and data analysis to outright targeting of activists, journalists, and their families.

While the Team Themis plot was exposed after an Anonymous hack of HBGary led to the publication of thousands of internal emails, the underlying strategic thinking behind such a plan remained in place. Essentially, Palantir was moving out of the realm of software development where it had styled itself a mere toolmaker and into the realm of corporate espionage. This early

foray into the world of spies and intelligence work highlighted the increasingly broad, and truly dangerous, scope of Palantir's capabilities.

The Many-Headed Hydra

Today Palantir is a world unto itself, with its fingers in just about every spook pie one could imagine. As Prof. Sarah Brayne, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas-Austin wrote in her 2017 study Big Data Surveillance: The Case of Policing, Palantir has become something of a "secondary surveillance network," able to track individuals and those in their personal and social networks without any crime being committed or even a specific query about a person. In effect, Palantir has become the Orwellian Big Brother we have feared for decades.

Palantir software can be found in the hands of LAPD and NYPD cops using Gotham and similar programs to track individuals with almost no information; just a license plate number and name can be used to track every movement of an individual associated with a vehicle, every email address and cell phone number is catalogued, every bank account and family relationship, etc.

It can be found in corporate headquarters where data analysts use Palantir products to generate actionable information about customers, markets, investments, and more. It can be found on every battlefield where the US military is engaged, and in most major cities.

It can even be found in the election of Donald Trump, as revealed by the Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Chris Wylie who told MPs in the UK that Palantir worked directly with SCL Group to harvest user data that was used directly in the election of Midtown Mussolini in 2016.

If there's a data point, chances are Palantir has it stored or can access it.

In effect, Palantir's products have transformed society into Bentham's panopticon, a nightmarish vision from a Foucault fever dream. Sadly, this is our reality…and it's monetized.

Palantir has made hundreds of millions of dollars collaborating with those elements of the military-industrial-intelligence complex that are paving the way for the true fascist state.

Or perhaps Thiel, Karp, and Palantir aren't so much paving the way for the fascist state as announcing that it's already here.